# Community-Based Rehabilitation in Benin

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was established by the UN General Assembly in 1965 to provide technical assistance to developing countries to improve their use of human and natural resources. UNDP and UNDP/International Initiative against Avoidable Disablement (IMPACT) have initiated a wide range of activities aimed at improving the prevention and treatment of disability around the world. The following story illustrates some of the ways in which UNDP is working to integrate services for disabled people into the community. Eleven-year-old twins Sam and Samson sit on a woven mat in the front yard of their small house in Cotonou, Benin. Sam lies down, and Samson carefully lifts his brother's left leg and slowly brings it back down to the ground. "One, two, three," they count together.

Sam and Samson, who, like most people in their community, use only their given names, look like any other children playing outdoors. But they are actually practising a series of daily exercises that have a significant impact on Sam's life. Both brothers contracted polio when they were babies. Samson recovered completely but Sam was not so lucky. Polio left several of his muscles partially paralysed.

Less than two years ago, Sam was barely able to move and was totally dependent on his family. Now, through his daily rehabilitation sessions with Samson, who received special training to help his brother, Sam has regained some muscular control. He also has been equipped with leg braces, and he walks to school every day with his brother. "Samson and I are in the same class," he says proudly.

Sam is among the beneficiaries of a pilot community-based rehabilitation programme for disabled people, supported by the Swedish Government and UNDP. The programme was launched in January 1990 in a district of the city of Cotonou and in the rural area of Comé in Benin.

The Government of Benin provided social workers for each pilot zone, training them for three months as community-based supervisors. Their role is to identify disabled people in their communities and assess their needs. "We help all kinds of disabled people," says Dominique Lawani, the social worker in Cotonou, "adults who need some help to start income-generating activities, and children who could go to school but stay home because of their disabilities."

Integration of disabled children into the regular school system is a main objective of the programme, which regularly organizes awareness seminars for teachers and school directors in Cotonou and Comé. "Community education and information about disabled persons is very important," says Constance Facia, who is in charge of the programme at Benin's Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. "In most cases, school directors are reluctant to accept disabled children, especially those with cerebral palsy," she says, explaining that cerebral palsy is often confused with mental retardation. She worked for quite a while to get 10-year-old Romuald accepted in a Cotonou school, and now the boy participates fully in the school programme "He is very bright. He will just need help to write, because his cerebral palsy affects the control of his hands," says Mrs. Facia.

Specialized institutions for disabled people in developing countries are very costly, are not always effective and are only available to a limited number of persons. A simpler and more practical approach calls for disabled people to stay with their families and improve their condition through simple rehabilitation exercises. This home-based approach also gives them an opportunity to learn skills that will help

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them to become productive rather than dependent members of the community.

"Lately, we have noticed an increasing number of disabled adults begging in the streets of Cotonou," says Mrs. Facia. "This is unfortunately a new trend. Disabled people used to be taken care of by their families, but now, with the worsening economic situation, many of them will end up in the streets."

Every day, Mr. Lawani rides his motorcycle around the Cotonou district covered by the programme. He personally contacts each family that requests help for a person with a disability and trains one family member to do rehabilitation exercises with that person daily. "I select the family member who is most likely to be available for daily practice," says Mr. Lawani. "The mother is usually the trainer, but if she is too busy, a sister or a brother is a good alternative." Sam and Samson experienced the training sessions as a game, illustrating the fact that when rehabilitation is approached as a potentially enjoyable activity, the disabled person tends to progress faster.

Among other disabled children supervised by Mr. Lawani is four-year-old Rodrigue, who contracted polio two years ago. He has just started rehabilitation, aided by his mother. Mr. Lawani makes sure that the exercises are done correctly. They include leg movements to improve mobility, as well as walking between parallel bars made of two long pieces of wood tied to the supports of the porch roof.

While over half of the beneficiaries of the UNDP-supported programme are children, the integration of disabled adults into the community is equally important. "We have young adults already in training for various jobs", says Mrs. Facia, "and others who want to acquire skills they can use to earn a living." Some young disabled women have chosen to learn dressmaking, while a group of deaf men are being trained in car repair.

"In many cases, disabled people cannot afford the cost of the apprenticeship," says Mrs. Facia. "When we ask enterprises to take a disabled person, we also ask them to lower the training cost." Usually, the response is good. Trainers charge half their usual fees and are proud to help someone with a disability. For example, a young man with cerebral palsy who wanted to learn secretarial skills was enrolled free of charge in a business school in Cotonou.

Volunteer rehabilitation committees composed of church representatives, parents of disabled children and other community members have been created in Cotonou and in Comé. Committee members in each region work closely with the rehabilitation agent to plan, manage and follow up on activities. They are very active in raising funds to help disabled people start income-generating activities.

In Comé, being in a wheelchair does not prevent 25-year-old Jacques from raising sheep and pigs. To help him get started, the local committee collected $US 160 to build a pen for the animals. "When disabled people need money to start their activities, we submit their cases to the committee for possible funding from the community," says Mrs. Facia. Support also comes from several international non-governmental organizations which provide surgical operations and braces for children.

UNDP has provided a consultant specializing in the rehabilitation of disabled people, who coordinates programme activities in Benin, Chad and Cote d'Ivoire. He strongly supports the community orientation of the programme. "We have to use a technique adapted to the people's capabilities and we also have to learn from the community itself," he says.

In Benin, there is no census of the population of disabled people. But an estimated 6 per cent of the population suffer from various disabilities. In the two regions covered by the community-based rehabilitation programme, over 100 disabled people have seen their living conditions improve significantly. In January 1992, four additional regions were to be included in the programme.

"Community-based rehabilitation requires a long-term effort on the part of disabled people, their families and the community," says Mrs. Facia. She is sometimes discouraged when a disabled person gives up the effort and quits the programme. "But when you see a child who was crawling on the floor, and who, months later, starts going to school, it is such a reward that it is worth every effort."

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